

Ryan Padraig Kelly World

**Each fossil had a story to tell,  
but they weren't what Daniel  
had expected...**

Daniel, you must get out of the house," Josephine said. "You must have a holiday."

Daniel looked up from a book, one of the huge volumes filled with etchings and diagrams of fossils.

"But I do get out of the house, Josephine," he said. "I go to the museum daily."

Josephine sighed.

"I know that. I mean a change of scenery."

She was thinking that she needed a holiday, too, but with Daniel one had to bring up domestic matters one at a time.

There was only space in this brain for one, with all the science in there.

“Travel?” he said.

“Well, not to France or Italy. The wars made that tricky and people are only just starting to cross the Channel again.”

“Wars . . .” he said. “Oh, yes. Those.”

She smiled. Daniel had hardly noticed Napoleon. She loved him

for his studious nature and his earnest dedication, but it could be trying.

“We should take a few days in the country,” she said. “Let’s say Oxfordshire for its beautiful villages.”

“Dorset,” he said, as though it were the only choice. “Lyme Regis.”

“Well, that would be charming,” she said. Then she realised what he meant. “Oh, now I see. Dorset for the fossils.”

Daniel stood up.

“You’re right. A holiday! I have not visited the Blue Lias for too long,

and Lyme Regis is a prime region for that geology.”

The Blue Lias she remembered – layers of limestone and shale that offered up their treasures to fossil hunters.

“Lyme Regis it is,” she said.

It was 1821 and Josephine Bostock was twenty-three, her husband thirty-six. He managed the fossil collections at a London museum.

Fossils were the fashion and visitors flocked to see Daniel’s displays.

He had no interest in the visitors; in fact he had been known to tut at

them as he made his way through the display areas, for getting in his way.

Still, Daniel purchased exhibits, catalogued them, decided on storage and display, and he read the literature, day and night.

Lately, the owner of the museum had been nudging Daniel to make better use of the collection.

Mr Forsythe had come to view the back rooms and had found the sheer number of items not in glass cases surprising.

Mr Forsythe was not a scientist, and he had built the Sanderson

Museum to attract tourists. It was a commercial enterprise.

His daughter Ruth was a friend of Josephine's.

"My father has asked Daniel to review all the items he has acquired," Ruth had recently told Josephine.

"We agree that Mr Bostock is brilliant, and valued, but Father does not see why some fossils are not shown."

Josephine knew why. Those fossils were merely fragments, duplications of things already on display.

Despite that, Daniel had bought every one because he could not resist it.

He constantly talked about the information that would one day tell him how each creature had developed, and when and how it had lived.

It was a controversial idea, that God had not made each animal on the day of Creation, but Daniel had taken it to his heart.

“I wish I could influence him,” Josephine told Ruth.

Ruth smiled. She knew Daniel Bostock well enough to know how hard he was to influence.

Anyone who met them was interested to find out why Josephine had chosen Daniel as a mate, but she did not feel she had to justify her choice.

She had fallen in love with him, he was a good man, and that was enough.

Her family, practical people, sometimes hinted that a husband buried in books was not a useful one.

Josephine came from a long line of ordinary Londoners, and during her youth had suffered grinding poverty when her father had



broken his back and been unable to work.

Her mother had been caring for four small children at home.

Josephine remembered those days every time she walked through her front door in Clapham, and said a tiny prayer of thanks.

It was a warm morning when Daniel and Josephine travelled to Dorset.

A maid had barely set their bags down in the hotel room before Daniel was putting on his boots for a walk along the base of the cliffs.

“It’s not the season for discoveries,” he said. “It’s winter storms that erode the rocks and bring gems to the surface. But you never know!”

Josephine hurried on with her own boots and followed him. The day had been tiring already.

She had wondered for a few weeks if she was expecting a child, and now she was sure – her fatigue was worse than usual.

She would tell Daniel when he had got over his fossil excitement.

They walked south and west towards the beaches, past terraced houses.

This was the part of the town where ordinary people lived. The hotels and boarding houses for tourists were higher up.

In front of four or five houses were rough tables, upon which fossil finds were advertised for sale.

Daniel stopped at each.

“There is no science here,” he said softly to Josephine. He was a clever man with a decade of education under his belt, but he was never superior.

“The fossil trade works well for us at the museum. These beachcombers offer whatever they find and we name the price.

“Forsythe would have to spend far more if these locals knew what a find was really worth.”

The last house had the longest table. A child of ten sat on a stool behind it, swinging his legs.

“These seem rather well organised,” Josephine said.

Daniel scanned the wares and Josephine recognised a few of them – part of what looked like an ichthyosaur jaw, and an ammonite.

“A little,” he said.

The boy looked at them.

“It’s not my shop,” he said in his soft Dorset voice. “It’s Aunt Mary’s.”

Daniel had picked up the skull fragment.

“I noted a woman’s name on one recent delivery,” he said vaguely. “I took two of ten sent, but they were of decent quality.”

“That’ll be Mary,” the boy said. “There’s not many women collect here. She’s my father’s sister.”

Daniel bought a fossil that he was sure was a good example of a certain vertebra he wanted.

He made a note of the item and the expenditure in his notebook.

“A woman beachcomber,” he said as they walked on. “I don’t imagine she can even read, this Aunt Mary.”

Daniel’s first trip to the cliffs was not a success, but he was undeterred. They ate dinner at the hotel and laughed about the odd names the locals gave to the fossils.

“Snake-stones,” Josephine said. “I suppose it’s an apt name for the ammonite, the way it curls round like a serpent.”

“The uninformed often give colourful but apt names,” Daniel said.

“The scientific community, on the other hand, aims for accuracy. Ammonoidea of the class Cephalopoda.”

“My favourite name – I heard it first today from a young man at Chippel Bay – is ‘verteberries’.”

“A typical mishearing for vertebrae, but charming.”

The following morning Daniel wanted to make an initial classification of his purchases, so Josephine headed into the town.

When she passed the table where the child had been, she saw that a woman with a calm, oval face had taken his place.

“Are you Aunt Mary?”

Josephine felt as though she was looking in a mirror: the woman was her own age, her own height, and their features were similar.

The difference was that the other's clothes were faded, frayed and oft-mended, and her face was drenched with fatigue.

Her appearance put Josephine in mind of her mother during those dreadful days when there was no food on the table.



The woman smiled, and inclined her head with the deference due to a better-dressed female.

“You met my nephew.”

“Do you collect?”

Mary’s face lit up.

“Since I was a tiny child.”

“My husband believes he recently ordered items for his London museum from you.”

“The Sanderson Collection?”

Josephine nodded.

“I included notes with the shipment,” Mary said eagerly. “I never went to the university . . .”

She laughed. “No woman ever does, of course.

“But I have read all there is to read, and I wrote what the items were, according to my best estimation—”

“So you can read,” Josephine said without thinking.

She knew straight away that she had offended her.

“Yes, I can read,” Mary said tersely.

“Of course.”

“The notes. Did your husband mention them?”

“I don’t believe so.”

Mary looked into Josephine's face as if deciding whether to speak.

"There are many here who grub around on the cliffs and don't care what they find, and pile it here in the lanes for visitors to buy as cheap souvenirs.

"Mrs Bostock, I love fossils, and the layers of rock, and the thought of the creatures waiting for me, for years upon years."

Josephine was startled.

"Never has any buyer looked in my face or my packages to see what I know or to see my passion for the science of it."

Mary looked down.

“I saw in you something – a young woman a little like me. But . . .”

“I am like you,” Josephine said quickly, thinking of that empty table in her father’s tenement, and the cold of those winters.

“I am so sorry, Mary, I did not mean to cause offence.”

Mary touched the stone wall behind her.

“The endless wars, and the men gone to fight, they stripped us of our livelihood. We have known shortages of food, prices of wheat

beyond our means. Dorset men planned riots, Mrs Bostock.”

Josephine realised she had not said her name.

Mary must have recalled it from her dealings with the museum, sending her fossils that were taken from their wrappings by Daniel, who had never so much as a thought for the person who lovingly packed them.

“You must be a strong person,” Josephine said, “to maintain your interest when assailed by poverty.”

“My passion, not my interest.”  
Mary took a deep breath.

“I have never been fairly paid, Mrs Bostock. Collectors note that I am a woman and see no need to reward me fairly.”

She stroked a finger gently in the smooth cavities of an ammonite.

“But I love these cliffs and the lovely things they show me. Men of science have great power over people like me; their money speaks.”

Josephine walked back to the hotel deep in thought. She made her husband put away the books and walk in the town with her again.

She told him they were going to have a baby, and she spoke to him

of the people who began the journey of every fossil that reached his hands.

“Mary Anning is a remarkable woman,” she said. “I want you to meet her. See what she knows.”

That winter there was an auction at the Sanderson Museum. A thriving market in fossils for individual homes meant that Daniel was able to make thousands of pounds.

He persuaded Forsythe that an annual retainer for suppliers would make a sensible policy.

It was Ruth and Josephine who did much of the persuading of both men, in reality.

“Fair prices,” Daniel said, as though it had all been his idea. “We don’t own the cliffs, after all. There are experts everywhere.”